

# Career Psychology in Australia: Where is it and where does it need to go?

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## Abstract

This paper will review changing definitions and processes of career guidance, and will emphasise the need for a renewed approach in education and psychology programs to prepare graduates for career service provision. It will present this argument within the emerging context where a new relationship between career guidance and public policy is fostering a significant array of government interventions in the provision of career services. These initiatives have significantly increased the urgency of this agenda.

## Demands of a changing understanding of career

It is unarguable that the demand for career development support is greater than ever before. The rise in practice of and concern for career guidance is due mainly to the complex changes in the traditional employment system, and consequent changes in our notions of career, education, and career guidance, changes which have also highlighted the need for a re-examination of career guidance practice (Patton, 2002; Watts, 1996). Watts emphasised the need for career guidance provision and the concept of career to change as they presently are “creatures of the industrial age” (p. 4). Collin and Watts (1996) asserted that individuals need to regard themselves as self-employed, with career needing to be viewed as a lifetime progression of learning and work, something that is owned by the individual, viewed subjectively and not objectively. Within this framework, a career is no longer tied to only those occupations that offer vertical movement through an organisation, it is a concept that is open to all individuals.

Such a new meaning for career places new demands on the role and function of career guidance (Herr, 1997). Career guidance does not occur in a vacuum; it is intricately linked to the contexts in which individuals operate and in which the process operates. Second, the economic value of career guidance is being increasingly acknowledged (Killeen, White, & Watts, 1992; Watts, 1999). Watts (1996) asserted that the function of career guidance in this context is as a market maker: the education, training and labour markets can work more effectively if all players are informed of the options and movements within each market. Third, career guidance remains a vital ingredient to fulfilling human development, and only partly because of the relationship between economic development and human development. Watts (1996) describes career counselling as one of the four ligatures necessary to facilitate the new concept of career to all individuals. He emphasises that careers are now based on a series of iterative decisions and individuals may need counselling at all of these decision points as they explore complex new pathways within the workforce and between education, training, and the labour market. The appropriate take up of these new pathways depends heavily on sound career decision-making. This is a complex activity and individuals need access to appropriate information about jobs and careers, courses, training and the labour market, which they can apply to their own skills, abilities, interests and circumstances. In addition they need opportunities, where necessary, for support to facilitate their processing of information and related skills (Patton, 2002).

This growing awareness of the centrality of career in people’s lives (ACES/NCDA, 2000) and the necessity to provide assistance to individuals as they construct the place of career in their lives at multiple points throughout the lifespan highlights the need for need for appropriately trained career development personnel to prepare individuals to engage in ongoing self-managed decision-making about their learning and work (McMahon, Patton & Tatham, 2003). This paper will emphasise the need for a renewed approach in education and psychology programs in Australia to prepare graduates for the career industry. In the same way as many OECD countries, Australia has been emphasising the importance of lifelong learning and active employment and career guidance policies as important tools of economic sustainability and social justice. Effective career guidance systems are necessary to assist all citizens to develop the skills to self-manage their careers in a rapidly changing work place.

## National and international context

Reviews of career guidance undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the World Bank (OECD, 2004a;b; World Bank, 2003) emphasised the need to improve the role of career guidance in meeting public policy goals in education, training and employment. In particular, the policy themes include improving career guidance across the lifespan, for young people and for adults; improving access to career guidance; and improving the systems that support career guidance. The OECD (2002) review of Australian career guidance practice emphasised that “A strategy for career development in Australia, at both national and state levels, could address three goals for Australians: economic independence, social inclusion, and personal fulfilment. It would need to be supported by three means: community partnerships, appropriate quality-assurance mechanisms, and appropriate tagged funding” (p. 25). Within Australia significant national activity has seen the following outcomes in recent years: a national curriculum blueprint (*Australian Blueprint for Career Development*), information provision and support through a national career information system ([myfuture.edu.au](http://myfuture.edu.au)); professional development at three levels (*Australian Career Development Studies*), the Career and Transition Services Framework; and support for a wide range of people and organisations involved in career service provision. In 2004, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training report on vocational education in schools made several recommendations in relation to career guidance provision, namely:

- Career education be a mandatory part of the core curriculum of the compulsory years of secondary schooling, clearly defined and distinct from VET programs;
- All secondary schools have at least one full-time professional career advisor, with appropriate specialist training, who can provide a dedicated career service;
- The professional development needs of career educators be better met through appropriate training and resources for professional development; and
- A clear set of national standards for the delivery of career education in schools be adopted.

Finally, the identified need world wide to improve the quality standards in training and professional accreditation has resulted in a number of strategies and activities (CICA, 2004; 2005).

## Tasks and Roles of Career Development Facilitators

Continuing change in the workplace has placed considerable pressure on the role of career personnel. Practitioners involved in career work are now found in a range of sites, including schools, universities and other education institutions, libraries, employment offices, and human resource departments. Change in the conceptualisation of career practice has also prompted a change in the language describing the role. In Australia, the then National Board of Employment, Education and Training recognised the multiplicity of tasks incorporated with the role and used the term careers coordinator as a descriptor (NBEET, 1992). This term was chosen to illustrate the multiple tasks which comprise the role. Traditional terms of counsellor, educator and information provider connote a process of an expert “doing to others”. The emphasis on the individual becoming one who manages their own career reinforces the need to reconceptualise the role and the language used to describe it. Building on the increasingly cited relationship between career development and lifelong learning (Cornford, Athanasou & Pithers, 1996; Watts & Sultana, 2004), Patton and McMahon (1999) supported the use of the term career development facilitator which provides a sense of unity between the tasks involved in career practice, grounds practice solidly within a lifelong learning framework, and connotes a different role for the counsellor as educator, and the client as learner.

In reviewing the range of ‘guidance occupations’ in European countries, many of which incorporate career practice, Watts (1994) identified the following main tasks undertaken by personnel. These included information management (education and training, careers and occupations, labour market, support services); work with individuals (assessment, information giving, counselling); work with groups (teaching, group counselling, facilitating self-help groups); placement (coaching, liaison with providers, placement in training, education or employment); follow-up; networking (supporting parents and teachers, advocacy, feedback to providers); and managing (internal programs and external).

In Australia the lack of consistency in national training in career development led to the development of the National Training Framework in 1992 by the then national body, the National Board of Employment, Education and Training. The breadth of the career coordinator role was acknowledged in the six general units of

competence identified: Professional Knowledge and Practice which underpins and overlaps all other units; Career Education and Career Guidance; Counselling and Career Counselling; Curriculum and Program Design; Organisation, Management and Consultation; and Information and Resources. Patton (2002) noted that appropriate training also needs to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the key theories underpinning career development practice, as well as an understanding of strategies to deliver career guidance services to a wide and diverse range of individuals in diverse settings. However there has been no systematic development of the framework over the last decade, although training programs in existence have often used it as a guide in their development.

Crozier and Lalande (2000) identified 10 domains of career counsellor expertise, suggesting that career counsellors could be expected to operate at different levels on a continuum of practice in each of the 10 domains. The domains include: client assessment, conceptualisation of client needs, individual differences, career theory, client goals and action plans, intervention skills, technological knowledge and skills, labour market knowledge, ethical career practice, and professional identity and attitude. Further, Flores and Heppner (2002) emphasised the need for career counsellors who work with culturally diverse groups to be competent in multicultural counselling and career counselling.

The competencies, tasks and role statements reviewed have identified a complex array of knowledge, attitudes and skills as necessary for career development facilitators. The need for appropriate training must now be seen as imperative. That this need is perceived world wide is also evidenced by a joint American Association for Counselor Education and Supervision and National Career Development Association Position paper on *Preparing counselors for career development in the new millennium* (2000). This paper identified the increasing complexity associated with career decision making and emphasised needed changes in definitions. The paper also identified a number of principles to guide curriculum change in career development training, and a set of recommendations for counsellor educators.

### **Status of Professionals engaged in Career Guidance in Australia**

While there has been a growth in the number of career professionals in the private sector as the profession has moved from its traditional location in secondary schools to a target population which includes people from all ages and career development stages, larger numbers of these professionals do not have specific training in career development engaging in the provision of career guidance services.

The dearth of training provision for career development practitioners has been well documented, both in Australia (McCowan & McKenzie, 1997; NBEET, 1992; Splete & Hutton, 1995), and overseas (Inkson, Furbish, & Parker, 2002; Splete & Hutton; Watts, 1994; Watts & Van Esbroeck, 1998). An audit of training of career personnel in Australia (NBEET, 1992) concluded that "Nationally, systems ignore the training of career coordinators ..." (p. 28). The review by McCowan and Hyndman (1998) highlighted the ad-hoc nature of training in Australia for the provision of career services. More recently, the OECD (2002) review of Australian Policies for Career Information, Guidance and Counselling Services noted that many career development practitioners have backgrounds in education, psychology, human resource management and social work, but no formal training in career development. This conclusion is similar to that drawn by Watts (1994) in his overview of occupational profiles of vocational counsellors in Europe. He noted the great variation in the extent of training required of career personnel in different positions, ranging from a degree in education or psychology followed by postgraduate training, to no training at all. The differences are related in part to varying definitions, for example a work placement officer may be termed a career worker, however Watts predominantly attributed the difference to the notion that career guidance may not be seen as a specialist activity in its own right, and that for people employed as psychologists, teachers, or administrators, career guidance is often viewed as an adjunct to the primary role.

The OECD review Report in 2002 concluded that "too often, qualifications from apparently related fields seem to be regarded as proxies for guidance qualifications without any verification of whether they assure the requisite competencies or not. This risks undermining the field's credibility in the eyes of fellow professionals and the general public" (OECD, 2002, p. 22). Australia is not alone in this acknowledgement that career guidance training and qualifications are rarely both specialised and at tertiary level, with the 2004 report of the OECD investigation into fourteen countries focusing on the need to develop training and professional standards for career development practitioners. This report also identified weaknesses in occupational structures in career guidance, and deficiencies in the level, nature and content of career guidance training influencing their capacity to provide appropriate services to diverse client groups. It asserted that existing training arrangements are a barrier to effective implementation of public policy objectives and recommended establishment of comprehensive competency frameworks.

In Australia, initiatives toward improvement of training arrangements and the development of practitioner standards were undertaken in 2004. The Department of Education Science and Training supported the development of *Australian Career Development Studies (ACDS)*, a nationally consistent articulated set of programs for career practitioners and others involved in supporting career development. ACDS is a series of three programs targeted to different levels of career practitioner needs (no formal qualifications required, Certificate IV level, and postgraduate certificate level). Each of the programs is on line and publicly available. *Career Development Services* is an accreditable postgraduate certificate unit consisting of four separate modules, including an assessment module, currently approved for credit into programs at three Australian universities.

In addition, the national peak body, the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA), a new alliance of eleven career-related associations which represents career professionals engaged across many sectors, including education, employment services, government departments and private companies, vocational education and training, and private practice published a review of competencies and standards documents of other associations (e.g., International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance, 2003; National Steering Committee for Canadian Development Guidelines and Standards, 2004). The core competencies identified by the IAEVG include the following:

- Demonstrate appropriate ethical behaviour and professional conduct;
- Demonstrate advocacy and leadership in advancing clients' learning, career development and personal concerns;
- Demonstrate awareness and appreciation of clients' cultural differences to interact effectively with all populations;
- Integrate theory and research into practice in guidance, career development, counselling and consultation;
- Skills to design, implement and evaluate guidance and counselling programs and interventions;
- Demonstrate awareness of his/her own capacity and limitations;
- Ability to communicate effectively with colleagues or clients, using the appropriate level of language;
- Knowledge of updated information on educational, training, employment trends, labour market, and social issues;
- Social and cross-cultural sensitiveness;
- Skills to cooperate effectively in a team of professionals; and demonstrate knowledge of lifelong career development processes.

Subsequent to the publication of this document (CICA, 2004), a national forum was held which has resulted in a national consultation process and a final report (CICA, 2005) which presents recommendations on industry membership and terminology, development and implementation of quality standards, the administration, management and maintenance of the standards, and the issues and roles of stakeholder groups.

### **The Role for Psychologists in Career Guidance: Being Part of the Action**

Postgraduate programs in career development in Australia are almost all located in Education faculties. In addition a number of private colleges offer courses in career counselling. Following a review of all Australian university psychology department websites by the author in 2004, only three psychology departments in Australia which offer any studies specifically in career development were identified. In addition, the units on offer were only elective units. As the current work toward the development of quality standards and requisite competencies of career practitioners in Australia, the profession of psychology needs to re-examine its graduate programs, most closely related being those in educational and developmental psychology and in counselling psychology. Such issues are also acknowledged in other countries, for example in the US where Dagley and Salter (2004) emphasise that "the intensity seems to have been ratcheted upwards with the increasing neglect of career counselors' training by graduate programs in counseling and psychology" (p. 38). Developments in Australia leave no doubt that psychologists will require specific postgraduate training in career guidance programs recognised by the national body to be accredited to work in career guidance services.

The Australian Psychological Society acknowledges that educational and developmental psychologists provide assistance in career guidance and school to work transition to adolescents and adults. However the guidelines developed to assist universities in preparing course submissions for postgraduate programs by the College of Educational and Developmental Psychologists (CEDP; APS, 2000a) are silent on many of the requisite competencies to prepare psychologists to engage in career development work. While acknowledging

educational and developmental issues across the lifespan, “theoretical content” does not name the very significant body of career development theory and “knowledge areas” does not include any of the requisite areas named previously in this paper, such as knowledge of updated information on educational, training, employment trends, labour market, and social issues. While the core areas such as professional issues and skills training in interviewing, counselling, consultation, assessment and planning, implementing and evaluating educational and developmental interventions are included, any focus on an extensive career related literature in for example career counselling and career assessment is absent. Similar absences are noted in the equivalent APS guidelines for the College of Counselling Psychologists (APS, 2000b), although it is noted that educational and vocational issues may be covered through formal units or electives.

It is important for the psychology profession in Australia to begin to work proactively in this changing context. First, a mapping of existing psychologists working in career guidance service provision needs to be conducted. Simultaneously existing undergraduate and postgraduate courses need to be mapped against the competencies for career guidance practitioners identified by CICA. Specialised additional work needs to be incorporated and recognised, either as part of existing two year masters programs in counselling, educational/developmental, clinical and organisational programs or as part of perhaps a graduate certificate structure. The OECD (2004b) provide suggestions around flexible offerings of specialised programs, incorporating distance learning and ICT to make training more accessible, and including accreditation of skills development and on the job experience with traditional learning models in order to recognise prior experience and learning.

## Concluding Comments

Recent developments suggest that the psychology profession in Australia will need to significantly review its current postgraduate programs in order for students to gain accreditation in the emerging career industry. A number of countries including Australia require a career specific tertiary qualification for industry accreditation (CICA, 2004). The psychology profession cannot afford not to be actively connected with current initiatives in the development of national quality standards in relation to the qualifications and training of career practitioners and related accreditation in the career industry.

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